On the lexical status of filled pauses: Seeing 'uh' and 'um' as words

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Abstract

Filled pauses (FPs: e.g., English *uh/um*, Japanese *e-(to)*) occur frequently in everyday communication. However, the exact linguistic status of FPs has been the subject of some debate. Some researchers have argued that FPs are words, with the same lexical status as such interjections as *well* or *oh* (Clark and Fox Tree 2002), or at least word-like in that they can be used in a controlled fashion (Villar et al 2012). However, others have argued that the evidence is inconclusive and that FPs can be regarded as resulting automatically from cognitive processes (Corley and Stewart 2008). I argue that FPs are words based on facts showing the systematic and distinctive use of FPs in speech corpora (Kjellmer, 2003), and particularly in a corpus of blog writings (Rose 2011). Evidence from these corpora show that FPs are used, among other ways, to highlight unexpected or unusual words and phrases (e.g., "Jan Wenner's famous pub has gone, um, gaga for [Lady] Gaga.").

Background: Filled Pauses

"Unlexicalized" Filled Pauses

The most widely observed form of FP is as a syllabic form with a monophthongal nucleus and an optional nasal coda.

English — uh /ə/, um /əm/

euh /œ/, eum /œm/ — French

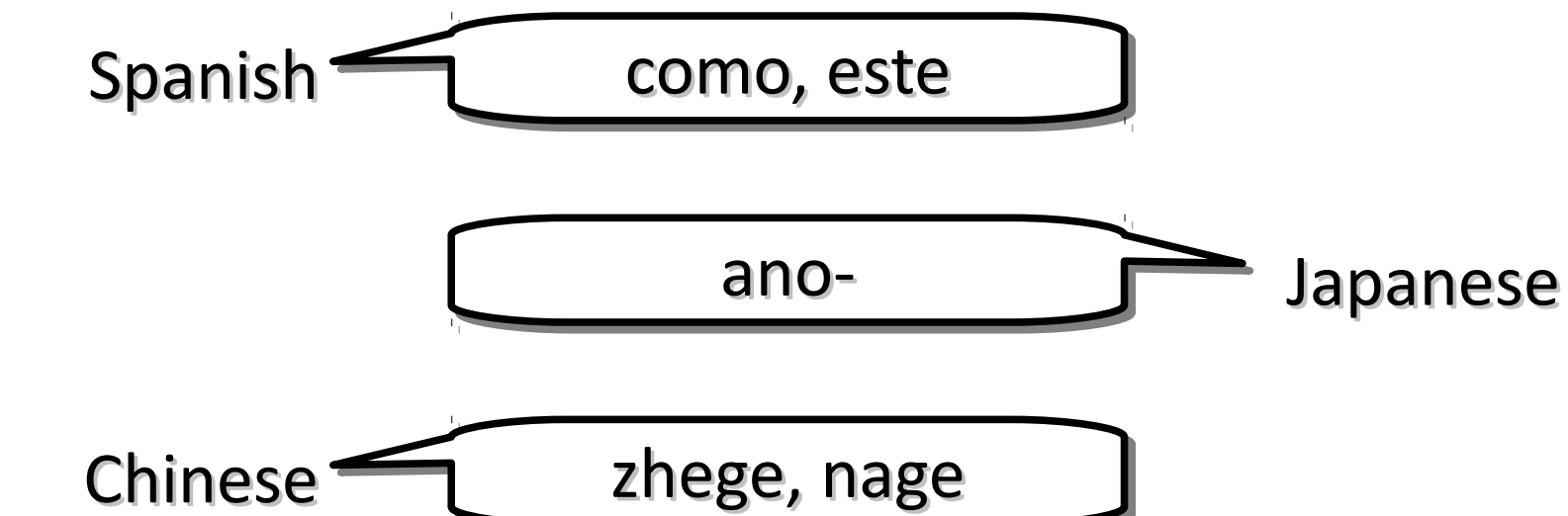Japanese — e- /ɛː/, e-to /ɛːto/

eh /ɛː/ — Spanish
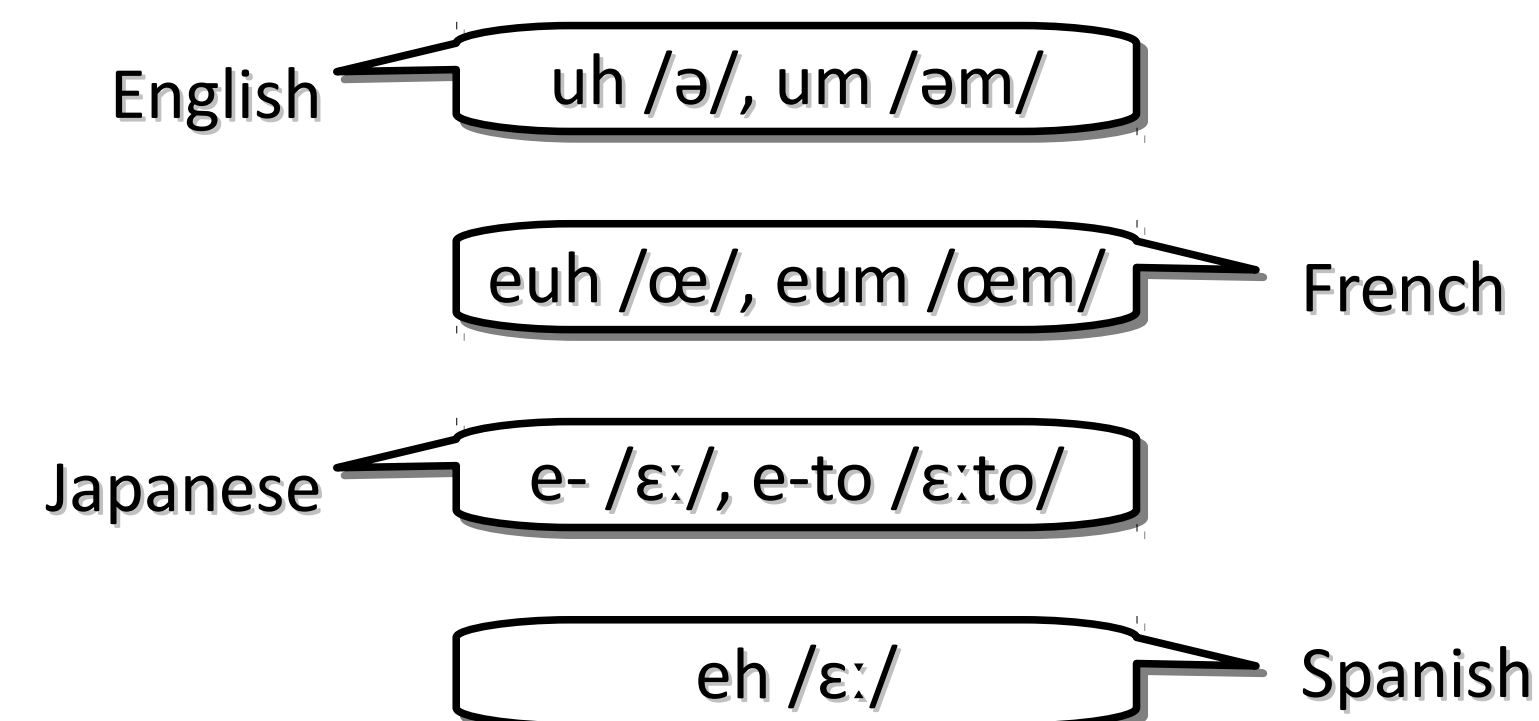
(Clark and Fox Tree 2002; Sadanobu and Takubo 1993)

For most researchers and in the present study, the full domain of FPs includes only the above so-called unlexicalized FPs. However, in some studies the following similar forms have been included.
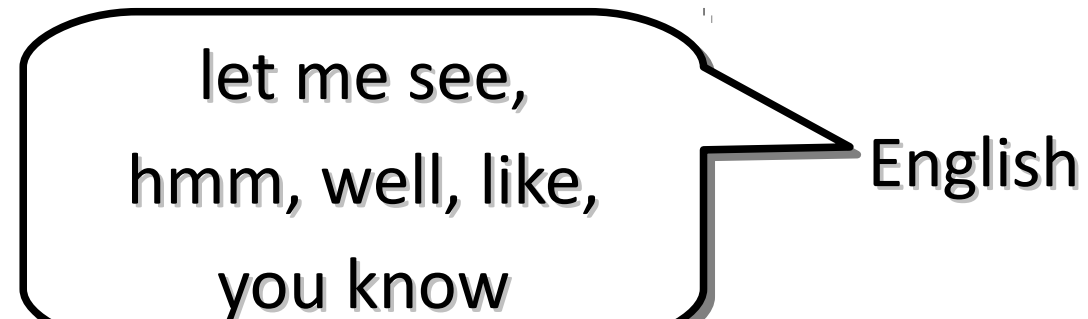
"Lexicalized" Filled Pauses

These are hesitation fillers which take a form that coincides with some lexical form in the language, often a demonstrative pronoun.

Spanish — como, este

ano- — Japanese

Chinese — zhege, nage
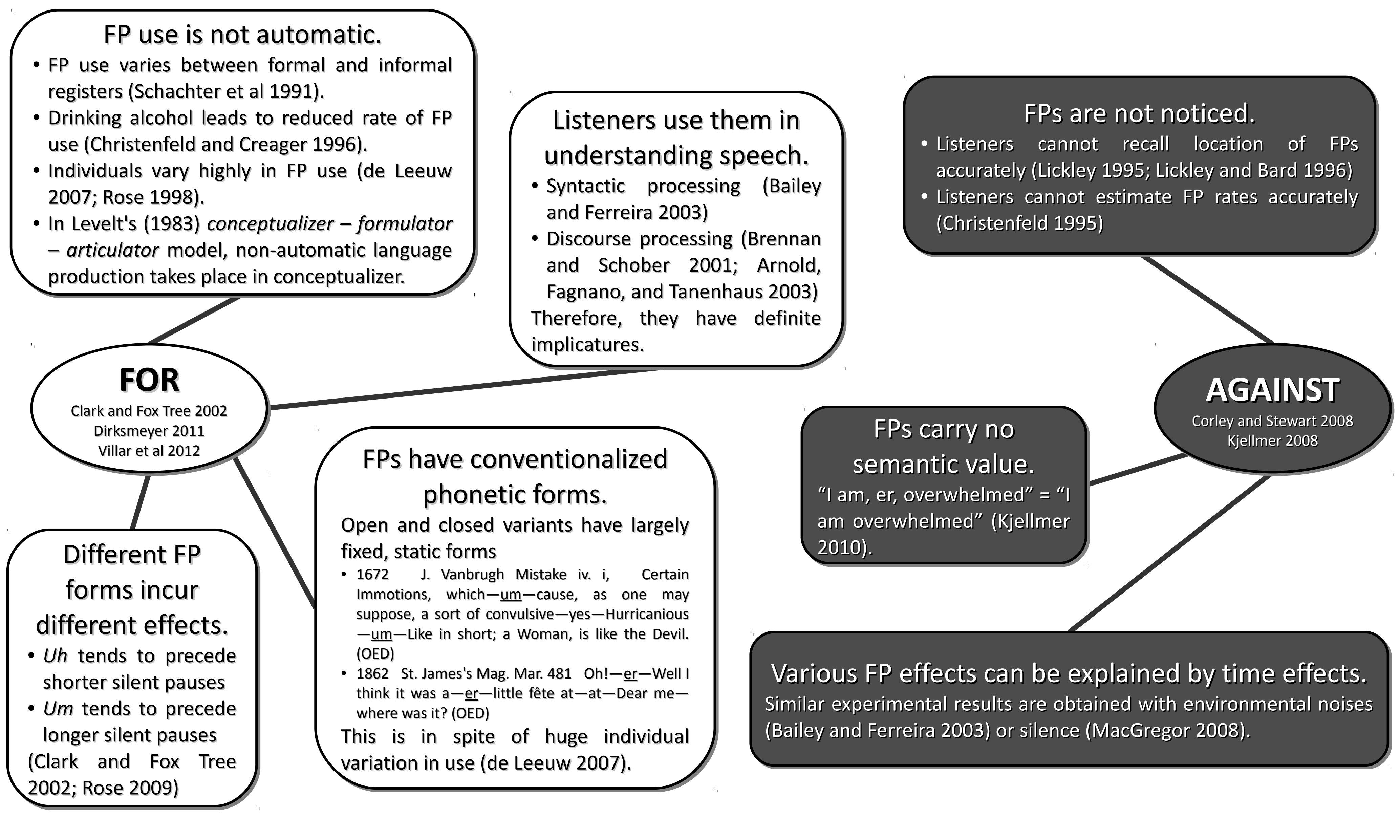
(Clark and Fox Tree 2002; Emmett, 1998; Wu 2008)

"Phrasal" Filled Pauses

These are hesitation fillers consisting of one word or more which also typically carry some conventionalized meaning or pragmatic purpose.
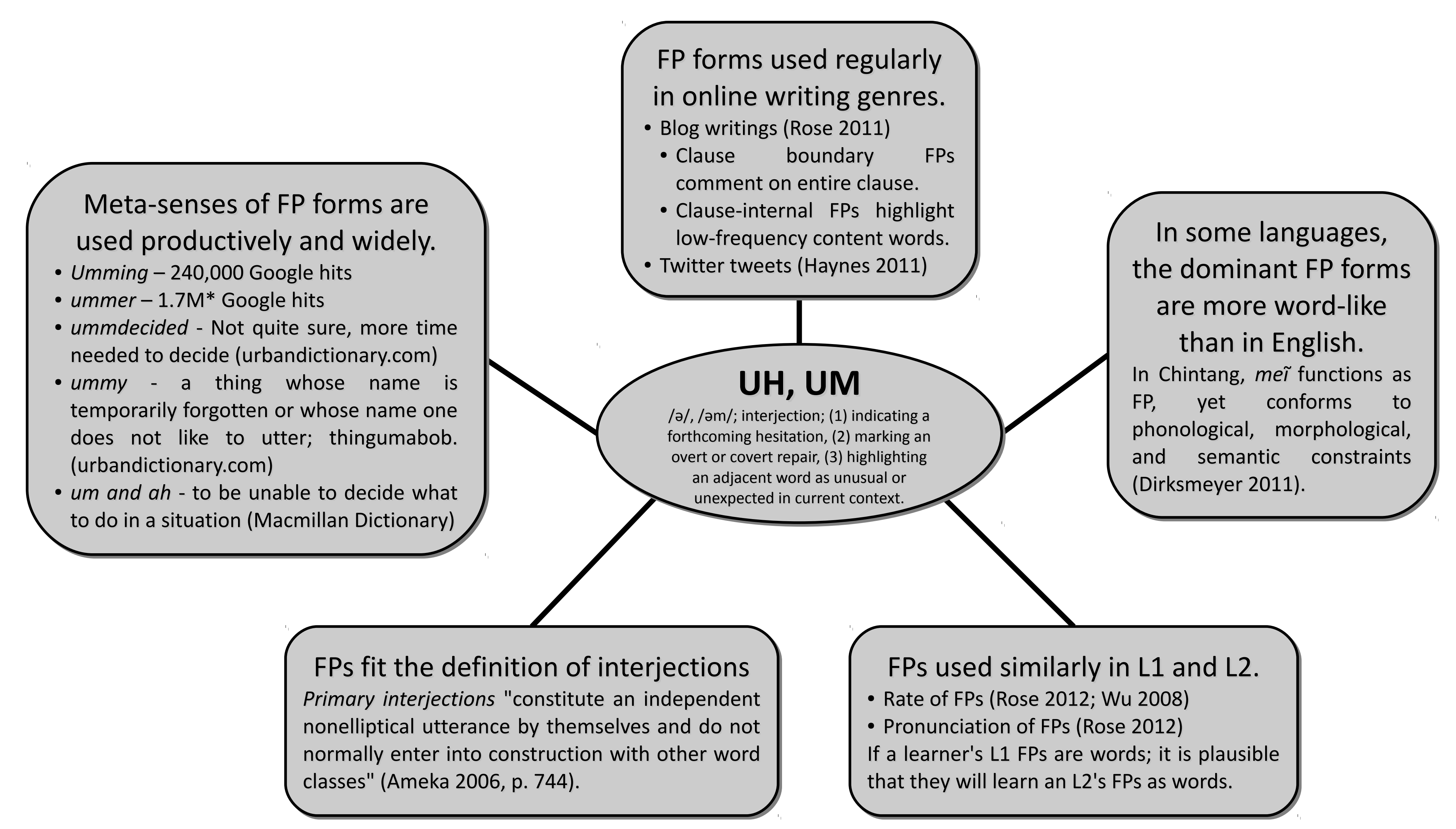
let me see, hmm, well, like, you know — English

(Rose, 1998)

Background: Filled-pauses-as-words Hypothesis

FP use is not automatic.
- FP use varies between formal and informal registers (Schachter et al 1991).
- Drinking alcohol leads to reduced rate of FP use (Christenfeld and Creager 1996).
- Individuals vary highly in FP use (de Leeuw 2007; Rose 1998).
- In Levelt's (1983) *conceptualizer – formulator – articulator* model, non-automatic language production takes place in conceptualizer.

Listeners use them in understanding speech.
- Syntactic processing (Bailey and Ferreira 2003)
- Discourse processing (Brennan and Schober 2001; Arnold, Fagnano, and Tanenhaus 2003)
Therefore, they have definite implicatures.

FPs are not noticed.
- Listeners cannot recall location of FPs accurately (Lickley 1995; Lickley and Bard 1996)
- Listeners cannot estimate FP rates accurately (Christenfeld 1995)

FOR
Clark and Fox Tree 2002
Dirksmeyer 2011
Villar et al 2012

Different FP forms incur different effects.
- *Uh* tends to precede shorter silent pauses
- *Um* tends to precede longer silent pauses
(Clark and Fox Tree 2002; Rose 2009)

FPs have conventionalized phonetic forms.
Open and closed variants have largely fixed, static forms
- 1672 J. Vanbrugh Mistake iv. i, Certain Immotions, which—um—cause, as one may suppose, a sort of convulsive—yes—Hurricanious —um—Like in short; a Woman, is like the Devil. (OED)
- 1862 St. James's Mag. Mar. 481 Oh!—er—Well I think it was a—er—little fête at—at—Dear me—where was it? (OED)
This is in spite of huge individual variation in use (de Leeuw 2007).

FPs carry no semantic value.
"I am, er, overwhelmed" = "I am overwhelmed" (Kjellmer 2010).

AGAINST
Corley and Stewart 2008
Kjellmer 2008

Various FP effects can be explained by time effects.
Similar experimental results are obtained with environmental noises (Bailey and Ferreira 2003) or silence (MacGregor 2008).

Synthesis: An Argument for the Filled-pauses-as-words Hypothesis

FP forms used regularly in online writing genres.
- Blog writings (Rose 2011)
  - Clause boundary FPs comment on entire clause.
  - Clause-internal FPs highlight low-frequency content words.
- Twitter tweets (Haynes 2011)

Meta-senses of FP forms are used productively and widely.
- *Umming* – 240,000 Google hits
- *ummer* – 1.7M* Google hits
- *ummdecided* - Not quite sure, more time needed to decide (urbandictionary.com)
- *ummy* - a thing whose name is temporarily forgotten or whose name one does not like to utter; thingumabob. (urbandictionary.com)
- *um and ah* - to be unable to decide what to do in a situation (Macmillan Dictionary)

UH, UM
/ə/, /əm/; interjection; (1) indicating a forthcoming hesitation, (2) marking an overt or covert repair, (3) highlighting an adjacent word as unusual or unexpected in current context.

In some languages, the dominant FP forms are more word-like than in English.
In Chintang, *meĩ* functions as FP, yet conforms to phonological, morphological, and semantic constraints (Dirksmeyer 2011).

FPs fit the definition of interjections.
Primary interjections "constitute an independent nonelliptical utterance by themselves and do not normally enter into construction with other word classes" (Ameka 2006, p. 744).

FPs used similarly in L1 and L2.
- Rate of FPs (Rose 2012; Wu 2008)
- Pronunciation of FPs (Rose 2012)
If a learner's L1 FPs are words; it is plausible that they will learn an L2's FPs as words.

Discussion: Search for more positive evidence

Establishing word-hood for FPs requires systematic evidence of several properties in the domains of syntax, semantics, phonology, and pragmatics. There is little controversy on the pragmatics of FPs, so positive evidence on the other three categories is desired.

Syntax

If FPs are subject to structural constraints, then it should be possible to observe certain well-established effects with ungrammatical sequences.

(a) Jan Wenner's famous pub has gone, um, gaga for Gaga.

(b) *Jan Wenner's famous pub has, um, gone gaga for Gaga.

In a grammaticality judgment task, for example, (b) should generate lower grammaticality rates than (a).

Semantics

One common use of FPs is in the middle of repair sequences (as an "editing term"; Levelt 1983).

(a) Now get to work on those Kinect *hacks* ... er , *applications*.

(b) #Now get to work on those Kinect *applications* ... er , *hacks*.

The repair in (a) is an appropriateness repair sequence where the reparandum, *hack*, is pragmatically infelicitous while the repair, *application*, is felicitous. In (b), however, the repair sequence goes from felicitous to infelicitous. In this respect, the meaning of the FP in (b) is semantically anomalous compared to that in (a). Hence, in an experimental paradigm that depends on semantic anomaly to trigger effects (e.g., N400 effects in ERP measurements), a difference should be observed between (a) and (b).

Phonology

If FPs are perceived and processed as words (before being filtered out of the message), then they should incur the same kind of phonological effects that other words do.

(a) Susan rode Michael's bicycle over to John's house.

(b) Susan rode Michael's bicycle over to, um, John's house.

The presence of the closed FP in (b) should prime words that are phonologically related to /əm/: *thumb, come, gum, mum, rum, umbrella, umpire, uncle*. Thus, in a lexical decision task, for example, these words should be judged lexical faster and with greater accuracy than other words.

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